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About Society: A Book Review Article of Work on Roth and Kundera by Shostak and Ivanova

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Gustavo SÁNCHEZ-CANALES

About Society:

A Book Review Article of Work on Roth and Kundera by Shostak and Ivanova

Cynthia Ozick's *The Messiah of Stockholm*, a novel whose premise is the protagonist's obsession to find Bruno Schultz's lost manuscript *The Messiah*, is dedicated to Philip Roth. Ozick wanted to acknowledge her indebtedness to Roth for publishing the edited volume *Writers from the Other Europe*. The Penguin Series in which the volume appeared makes accessible in English the work of such authors as the Serbian novelist Danilo Kiš, the Polish writers Tadeusz Borowski and the aforementioned Bruno Schultz, and the Czech novelist Milan Kundera, among others. Roth's interest in Central and East European writers had begun a decade earlier when he was travelling back and forth between the U.S. and Europe to meet and interview fellow writers. As a result of his encounters, Roth developed a long-standing friendship with Kundera.

In "Conversation in London and Connecticut with Milan Kundera," an interview Roth made with Kundera in 1980, Roth points out that "in one of [his] books [Kundera] characterize[s] the era of Stalinist terror as the reign of the hangman and the poet" (95) and Kundera replies that "totalitarianism is not only hell but also the dream of paradise — the age-old dream of a world where everybody lives in harmony, united by a single common will and faith, without secrets from one another. André Breton, too, dreamed of this paradise when he talked about the glass house in which he longed to live. If totalitarianism did not exploit these archetypes, which are deep inside us all and rooted deep in all religions, it could never attract so many people, especially during the early phases of its existence. Once the dream of paradise starts to turn into reality, however, here and there people begin to crop up who stand in its way, and so the rulers of paradise must build a little gulag on the side of Eden. In the course of time this gulag grows ever bigger and more perfect, while the adjoining paradise gets ever smaller and poorer" (95-96).

The dream of paradise as envisioned by totalitarian regimes is at the centre of Velichka Ivanova's *Fiction, Utopie, Histoire: Essai sur Philip Roth et Milan Kundera*. The book, a comparative study between four novels of Milan Kundera — *The Joke*, *Life is Elsewhere*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* — and four novels of Roth — *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain*, and *The Plot Against America* — is an attempt to demonstrate that both novelists "reinvent" History through their fiction. In Ivanova's view, the novels of Kundera and Roth show a connection between History and the writers' personal experiences. A few years earlier, in *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives* (2004), Debra Shostak explored the theme of Roth's fictionalization of (personal) history in what could be called the "multiple possibilities of the subject." As Shostak explains, "Roth seems to view the enterprise of fiction-making as a multi-dimensional and many-voiced dialogue. The writer talks to himself, through a diverse population of fictive avatars, in order to pry out the many selves he inhabits and embraces and thus to sketch out a host of counterlives" (3). What is most interesting about Shostak's point is that, according to her and drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, Roth's novels introduce the writer-narrator who is talking to himself through a host of imagined personas in order to disclose his inner selves.

It is in the above context that Shostak's notion of "countertexts" and "counterlives" take shape. In her opinion, the writer/creator's characters talk to themselves in order to ponder who and what they are, what positions they occupy, how they are trapped within their own self-consciousness, and how they can come to terms with themselves. In the case of Roth this has to do with his refusal to accept any one position, his own included. What he does offer is a position linked to a series of choices and possibilities: "Roth has chosen to explore the process of how one comes to rest at a position, how one thinks about what one really thinks, by tracing the journeys of imagined selves through a series of subject-positions" (7). "These 'journeys of imagined selves' — closely connected with what Shostak calls 'the book of voices' (4) — is clearest in *The Counterlife*, where Roth confronts his protagonist with several pairs of choices. The point here is that the reader is not immersed into a real story but into a series of imaginary stories — in Ivanova's explanation, Roth's reinvention of history through fiction.

Shostak explores Roth's "book of voices" — i.e., his life and literary career — from different points of view. As she explains in her introduction, Roth's novels revolve around a series of concerns about the individual subject which he has developed, but never solved. She focuses on Roth's writing about masculinity (masculinity, embodiment, and male sexuality), Jewish American identity, the US-American subject's relationship to contemporary US-American history, and storytelling as a mode of action which combines invention and pseudo-autobiography. The fact that Roth explores a problem

from multiple perspectives is, according to Shostak, crucial, as this is what enables the reader to differentiate between fiction and autobiography. She finds that some scholars' and critics' inability to see this has led them to view his novels as autobiographical at best and as narcissistic at worst. Shostak points out that "the art of impersonation is the foundation of Roth's fiction of counterlives, and he has spoken many times about the process of invention that draws counterlives from the writer's self" (8). If one is interested in analysing Roth's fiction as "counterhistory," Shostak's work is especially timely. Her point of departure is that Roth's countertexts have inquired into what the facts are, what history is, and how one can know history and write about it. In order to answer these questions, Shostak writes, for instance, that through his alter ego Nathan Zuckerman in *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain* Roth realizes that, on the one hand, one can only understand the other's present by reconstructing his/her past and, on the other, that one can only know oneself as a deformation of the other. Hence, "historiography [in Roth's work] is inseparable from narrative explanations of the subject who is, in turn, formed in intimate relation to the events and discourses of his environment" (232).

To my mind, Shostak's *Countertexts*, *Counterlives* ought to be a key reference to Velichka Ivanova's book *Fiction, Utopie, Histoire. Essai sur Philip Roth et Milan Kundera*. Anchored on a similar idea, Ivanova explores the possibilities of what is probably the most interesting aspect of the book, namely the concepts of "utopie"/"contre-utopie" discussed in light of a comparative analysis between Kundera and Roth. Drawing on François Ricard's distinction between what he calls the "Idylle de l'innocence" and the "idylle de l'expérience," Ivanova explains that, according to Kundera, communist ideology is the most significant element of the "idylle de l'innocence" in societies where Soviet communist ideology and practices had a devastating impact. Kundera's rebellious characters strive to move from the "idylle de l'innocence" to the "idylle de l'expérience" and the price they pay is their isolation and alienation. In turn, the evolution of the Rothian protagonist is similar: he/she initially lives in an "Idylle de l'innocence" — a pastoral — until, at a certain point, the protagonist realizes that living in an "innocent" world is incompatible with modern life. An example of this is obvious in *The Human Stain*. Coleman Silk is a professor of classics who, after being unfairly accused of sexual harassment, not only resigns from his position but also runs away from the civilized world, i.e., the academe. Coleman ends up in a snow-covered landscape devoid of human life, an epitome of Roth's pastoral. The problem is that History is unpredictable and it may tragically turn up at any moment. One of the lessons the individual should learn is that if he/she lives in an "idylle de l'innocence" — typical of the Kunderian character at the outset of the novel — imposed by a totalitarian regime, it must be to the detriment of one's own past. When confronting History, Kundera's characters need to reconstruct the others' past in order to understand their present.

Kundera's protagonists and their eventual determination to escape from the "idylle de l'innocence" is, in Ivanova's interpretation, also present in many of Roth's protagonists. For instance, in *I Married a Communist*, Ira Ringold, a philocommunist Jew who lives his life in a lie, tries to make a better world and can only continue to keep his dream alive — living in an "idylle de l'innocence" — by remaining uncritical of the totalitarian state. Indoctrination is a perverse tool which, in exchange for making the indoctrinated believe that they are contributing to the best possible world, will force them to give up their freedom and power of free thinking. Like Kundera, Roth believes that it is utopian — "innocent" — to believe in the revolutionary change advocated by a totalitarian regime like communism. Instead, the individual should think that life is ineluctably unfair because human nature is flawed. The revolutionary change then ends up in a dictatorship and in a state of terror. "Utopia" has no place in this world, our world. To Shostak, *I Married a Communist* epitomizes "the wrath of history" (249). In effect, the name Ira — "wrath" in Latin — is a trope which points to the protagonist's feelings of outrage throughout the story. While Ivanova considers that Ira realizes that he needs to move away from the state of innocence to a more realistic state of experience, Shostak focuses on the concept of "counterimagination." Shostak finds that, in the effort he makes to expose his multiple selves to several viewpoints, Roth replaces the feeling of nostalgia as displayed by Seymour Levov in *American Pastoral* by a feeling of wrath as displayed by Ira. While one of Ivanova's central points is that Ira decides to give up the communist ideology to the benefit of freedom and free thinking, Shostak's point is that Roth shows a deterministic view of history through Ira. As in the case of the other protagonists in Roth's trilogy (Levov and Silk), Ira symbolizes the idea that the self is not only a subject in history, but a subject to history as well. Hence, each of these characters "represents a version of the archetypal narrative of the outsider's entrance into American culture" (Shostak 237).

As for one of Roth's later novels, *The Plot Against America*, Ivanova regards it as another example of the novelist's questioning of idyllic US-America. Roth, who reinvents a historical event — the election of the anti-Semite Charles Lindbergh to the presidency of the United States of America — reveals

the insecurity Jews felt everywhere while the nazis and fascists were in power. As the narrator explains throughout *The Plot*, the victory of Lindbergh is the beginning of the nightmare for the Roth family. In this way, history and fiction merge in Roth's narrative. Roth's (invented) childhood is shaped by the shattering of his "idylle de l'innocence." The fictional Lindbergh legalizes fascist organizations because they fight against the communist revolution. The novel affirms the idea that an idyllic U.S. — a pastoral — is an illusion that History can crush at a moment's notice. In this respect, Ivanova explains that "Roth and Kundera poke fun at the idyll and pastoral which offer their univocal visions of totalitarian purity. They do not reject tradition. They superimpose a parodic vision on the Weltanschauung. Pastiche and irony are the forms of their indirect revolution. The novel transforms the past into reinvented history" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("Roth et Kundera parodient l'idylle et la pastorale qui offrent des visions univoques de pureté totalitaire. Ils ne rejettent pas la tradition. Ils superposent à la vision du monde ordinaire une vision parodique. Le pastiche et l'ironie sont les formes de leur révolte indirecte. Le roman transforme le passé en histoire réinventée" [158]).

One of the central ideas of Roth's trilogy is that utopian dreams of racial and social purity and the advocacy of the individual to the detriment of society may be (tragically) dangerous. This is something Roth shares with Kundera. Since, for both novelists, society smothers the individual, their respective characters advocate an individual's right to seek his/her own fate and future. Inevitably, the protagonists of Kundera and Roth seek isolation, which results in forgetting (hence the title of Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*). This is their initiation into the "idylle de l'expérience" in Kundera's *The Joke* and *Life Is Elsewhere* and Roth's *The Human Stain* and *I Married a Communist*. This (anti)"idylle"/"counteridyll" in Shostak's analysis — and that rejects anything connected with totalitarianism — is against the idea that a lyrical attitude towards life and (communist) revolution get together in an attempt to improve humanity's existence by removing anything that does not conform to that aesthetic ideal. Kundera, who knows that kitsch praises the sentimental, the romantic, and the fake, attacks it and he thinks that it is fallacious to believe in the power of brotherly love which can only be achieved through kitsch. He has realized that this is a key device used in communism to manipulate the individual. Hence, in Ivanova's view Kundera and Roth denounce the dangers of a complete totalitarian purity.

One way to attack "idylle" is through irony and humour and only through irony can a serious reflection be made without falling into sentimentalism: "our writers come together with the typical attitude of the contemporary artist who balances feelings with reason, doubt and laughter" ("Nos écrivains se réunissent dans l'attitude caractéristique de l'artiste contemporain qui équilibre le sentiment par la raison, le doute et le rire" Ivanova [150]). In *Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth*, Elaine B. Safer focuses on the significance of comedy in Roth's fiction. Taking as point of departure Roth's well-known motto "sheer playfulness and deadly seriousness are my closest friends," Safer claims that what matters to Roth is comedy, not factuality: "Roth combines laughter and pain, farce and horror as he describes both the loss of the dream and the inability to confront its collapse" (Safer 2). She goes a step further when stating that "Roth develops humor by deconstructing traditional expectations for plot and character and by intermixing fantasy and reality" (Safer 26). It is true that Safer, Shostak, and Ivanova place a great emphasis on the blurring of boundaries between reality and imagination in Roth's fiction, but it is also true that in the view of these three scholars one should not ignore the weight of the characters' past in the(ir) present. For this reason, Ivanova thinks that one of the great dangers of a totalitarian regime like communism, as perceived by Kundera, is that it pursues the annihilation of the past in favor of an ideal present which is paving the path for a better future.

Totalitarian ideology results in considerable simplification of the individual's thought by seeking a society free of conflicts and tension. Its main goal is to get individuals who think in a similar way so that independent thought disappears. Thus, the work of fiction should try to assert its (self-) independence from dominating ideologies. One needs to distinguish "the ideologue, that is to say the one who serves the tyranny of the group or the self, the independent individual" ("l'ideologue, c'est-à-dire celui qui sert la tyrannie du groupe ou du moi, de l'individu indépendant" [Ivanova 143]). Ivanova recalls that Nathan underscores the fact that ideologue Johnny O'Day in *I Married a Communist* never smiles and, when he does, he smiles in a pathetic way (143-44). The same happens to Ira, whose inability to reason and to be sarcastic — essential to take some distance from life — has been severely undermined by the dominating ideology. Inevitably, if the fiction writer is to put up a barrier between him/herself and the dominating ideology, his/her need for isolation — which entails some degree of intimacy — is obvious. For instance, in *The Joke*, Ludvik, who after being expelled from the communist party considers the possibility of loving again, pursues self-isolation and, once he is outside the realm of society, falls in love with Lucie. A similar case is that of Silk and Faunia in *The Human Stain*. Like

their counterparts in Kundera's novel, Coleman and Faunia seek the realization of their love away from society — the pastoral. They wish to be "forgotten" by society — an epitome of History in Roth — and for this reason they end up far away from it.

Unfortunately, it is not so easy to escape the ineluctability of History and this is exemplified in the epigraph of *The Human Stain*: "what is the rite of purification? How shall it be done? By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood." Shostak's line of argumentation is no different: departing from the idea that Roth has a deterministic view of history, *The Human Stain* is built upon the issue of secrecy. As Shostak puts it, one of Coleman's mistakes — I would call it his *hamartia* — is to believe that, just the same as his girlfriend Faunia, history can be kept as a secret and the last chapter, "The Purifying Ritual," serves to disclose Coleman's secret, which leads to tragedy: the human stain is "what keeps the human subject alive in history" (Shostak 266). Not only does the human stain — i.e., impurity, imperfection — keep the individual alive but his/her need to steer clear of the paradisiacal life promised by totalitarianism where there is no room for critical thinking: "the totalitarian, whether founded on Marx, Islam, or anything else, is a world of answers rather than questions. In any case, it seems to me that all over the world people nowadays prefer to judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than to ask, so that the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the noisy foolishness of human certainties" (Roth, "Interview" 100). Shostak's work on Roth's and Ivanova's work on Kundera and Roth suggest that individuals need to negotiate and question society and the novels of Kundera and Roth exemplify this basic tenet of humanism.

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